

Podcast Series: Holistic Nature of Us

Episode # 43: Meet Craig StandingBear

<http://www.judithdreyer.com>

Hi I'm Judith Dreyer,

Thank you for joining me for this pod cast series "The Holistic Nature of Us".

My intent is to take us, you and I, into a better understanding of the concepts behind our holistic nature and how that ties directly to the holistic nature of the world around us. How can we connect the dots in practical ways that we are nature and nature is in us?

I will be featuring authors and educators, practitioners and others whose passion for this earth helps us create bridges. We'll see what's trending, what's relevant to our world today, not just for land use, but to connect the dots between nature and ourselves. It's time for practical action and profound inner change so our natural world is valued once again.

Today I'm delighted to introduce you to Craig Standing Bear. Craig is of the Mohawk, Scottish and French-Canadian tradition. He is a flute player, storyteller and a moccasin maker. Today I've invited him to share a story or storytelling in the Native American tradition with us. We are ending one year. We are going into another. We also have the turning of the wheel. We're going from autumn into winter.

Craig welcome and thank you for coming today.

CRAIG: You're welcome.

JUDITH: Tell us more about from the Mohawk perspective or from your Native American traditional perspective about the art of storytelling.

CRAIG: Well storytelling traditionally in this part of the world is done in the winter. Because it's that time of the year it's because things are done for the season. The harvest has been gathered and lots of the tools and things that

we needed for that time of year were finished being made. People had a lot of time. Even though stories were told all year long, all seasons but the relatives of the children and young people it was the perfect time to tell stories in the winter because there was nothing really to do. You know how children get a little antsy. So, it was a perfect time. Storytelling is kind of like a mailman in the old days, or a newscaster. They would come with news from all over the land, things about games or meetings. Things that were well known like people getting married or people maybe wanting to get married, whatever the news was in the day they would transfer along these things as well telling stories.

JUDITH: So, you're saying that the storyteller actually has had a pretty honored position within tribal life. He's the main communicator traveling great distances, is that correct?

CRAIG: Yes, it is. They would travel sometimes hundreds of miles to stop at village to village and tell these stories. And most of these people knew him fairly well because he would come every year. The children grew up with a particular storyteller coming every year and they looked forward to that. It was a time of year when people needed something to do and they needed some knowledge and they needed some news from somewhere else. So, it was a really good time of year for the storyteller to come. And generally, the payment would be food or some clothing that they may need that had been worn out in their travels and that settled the payment because there was no money, except maybe wampum. Wampum was made from the quahog shell and those kinds of things would be valuable to them when they needed something that they couldn't trade so they would have the wampum to trade and a lot of times that was made into jewelry. It was made into something that they could wear around their neck or on a bag and sometimes maybe just loose in a bag, like a tobacco bag. They had what they needed and if they needed something it was provided for them.

JUDITH: In tribal life, back in the day, not only did they honor the storyteller, but they took care of him. So, a person could travel knowing that wherever his destination was he would be warm, hopefully, and get good food and probably create a lot of laughter and excitement amongst the tribe in that neck of the woods.

CRAIG: Exactly. And the food that they would give these people...they would feed them daily while they were there. To supply them with food

from one village to another while they were traveling, they would give them traveling cake. It was kind of like a johnnycake. It was a journey cake in those days and it was made with fats and berries and nuts and things that were really nutritious and it was covered in rendered fat so that it wouldn't spoil. And he could carry that for months, so it was a good, a very, very, how would you say, unique situation because most people don't realize how much is really carried by these people, how much knowledge and items to trade and all these things. So, they were part of the trade route as well, trading goods.

JUDITH: In today's world, let's fast forward to today's world, you're considered a storyteller. Tell us about how you got into it and what you enjoy about sharing the stories.

CRAIG: Well I always enjoyed telling stories anyhow and it kind of morphed into telling stories to people around the campfire and then into schools in Vermont and then Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Nursing homes, I would play my flutes there. It just kind of morphed into that for extra curricular activity if you would. It was something I didn't really get paid for very much, and sometimes schools with enough money would pay me. And then the whole part of the storytelling thing that I morphed into developed from knowledge from my elders was that we carry a bag around our shoulders on the strap and in that bag, we would put little items that reminded us of the stories that we wanted to tell. I started doing that. I found an old piece of fur and I made a bag out of it and put little items in there that reminded me of my story. And when I was doing my piece for children, told a story to children, I'd have them pick something out of the bag and whatever they picked out I'd tell that story. And it's really gets them involved in being part of the story. And I don't just tell them; I act them out and do like a little play. I'll dress up and I'll do the whole thing. It's very much how the old ones would do it. They would have their stories, but they would act them out. They didn't just sit there. Because they didn't have books, so we had to remember these stories and tell them and reenact them.

JUDITH: And that's a skill in itself because you have to hold an audience and it may not just be the little ones in tribal life. Everybody would probably sit around the fire and want to listen. And as you and I both know stories have many levels, many meanings. How we hear a story at 9 years old is very different from how we hear it when we're 19 years old.

CRAIG: Yes, it is and it's very different. Because as a child you hear a story in a certain way and they haven't the experience of life to put other meanings into it. It's just a simple thing. The story I'm going to tell was originally a very simple story that came to me and I will tell you that story of how it came it.

JUDITH: Well before you tell the story, I just want to tell the listeners that I love the winter native tradition of storytelling in general any way. And we have the Winter Solstice coming up and that to me always reminds me about storytelling, maybe making the effort to really listen to our families' stories differently this year. I'd like to make that as a suggestion when we go to the family gatherings. I just participated in a family gathering recently where two of my cousins who are only 11 and 14 wanted to get together with us old folks, you know, or older folks, and I was really surprised at that. They were very interested in hearing some of the stories about our lineage. I was really taken aback by that. So, no, I don't think it's a lost art. And of course, our media tells stories every day and throws all kinds of stories in front of us every day. But the simpler art of storytelling, being with our families, sitting around the table with a good meal over the holidays, invites storytelling. And so, I encourage my listeners to maybe prod some of the folks in your family a little bit and go deeper into the stories.

I've invited Craig here because I know he's a storyteller and he's got some great stories in his bag that he mentioned. But he's going to share one with us today in particular, and I'm going to let him tell us that story.

CRAIG: Okay. The stories are more of a teaching mechanism. Most of the stories I tell are not just those stories. They're designed to teach a lesson in life, and that's what children needed because we didn't have schools as such as we have today. The schools were our woods and our elders and the things that we observed in nature. So that's why these stories are written the way they are, to tell an interesting story that explains nature, explains what happened, the Winter Solstice or however you're going to try and explain things to a child or to a young person or even an adult. They work very well.

So, I have a story and I have had many stories come to me. This particular one came to me with my elders and when I was home studying in Vermont, I was kind of off the grid and I got my water from the river or the brook. And

this particular time was winter, and it was very cold, way below zero. I had gotten my water and I sat down next to my birch tree and I looked at my field and I listened to the snow hitting the ground. This story came to me and I will tell it to you pretty much as it came to me.

JUDITH: That's great. And what I like that you mentioned, is that the words, nature words, the storyteller was the teacher back in the day before we had formal schools in the native tradition here on this land anyway. We learned a lot from nature by observing it. And that's the point of the podcast series, *The Holistic Nature of Us*, it's to remind all of us that the answers, solutions are in nature. We have forgotten to look to nature on that level. I'm hoping to create bridges of understanding that way. I think storytelling and the story you're going to tell us is just another spoke on the wheel of life that has value and I'm grateful that you're here.

CRAIG: Thank you very much and I'm grateful to be here. To me these stories are important. It's not only because it's a Native American story in a sense but because it teaches us something. Lots of people divorce themselves from nature, the natural world, and understanding things in this manner helps us remember them when we tell a story whether you're a child or an adult.

So, this story is called "Ice Monster" being a winter story and I'll tell it the way I wrote it.

Many winters ago, as today there were great monsters in the land. There was one who was called Ice Monster who lived far to the north where it was very cold, where there was ice and snow covering the earth. At a certain time of the year Ice Monster would get very hungry for trees, which were his favorite food. He would walk very slowly to the South where there were many, many trees to eat. Well those trees would know he was coming because he came every year, you see. All the trees were very afraid. Sure enough Ice Monster arrived and began eating many trees. Because he was so cold, the trees would also become very cold and that's the way he liked them. He would stand over them with his big sharp teeth and claws. He would bite into them and break them apart.

Now birch was very afraid because she was his favorite tree to eat because she had a very special sweetness to her sap. One day when the last moons of winter were close birch had an idea. She realized that because her bark

was black Ice Monster would see her against the white snow. Even though his eyesight was very poor. So, she changed her bark to white to blend in with the snow, but she forgot to change the tips of her branches. Now Ice Monster was very close, so when birch called out to her friend the South Wind, the South Wind would arrive every year at this moon, but birch needed her now.

The sun had come and gone many times and one day Ice Monster was standing right near birch, but he did not see her because of his poor eyesight. He did see the tips of her black branches against the blue sky. He howled and stomped his feet saying, "Oh, what is this? Are they birds? They don't fly like birds. Maybe they are bugs? Nah, too cold for bugs. Ha, ho now I see you birch. You thought you could fool old Ice Monster. I see those black things are your branches. That is when birch realized she had forgotten to change the tips of her black branches to white. Now she shook with fear as Ice Monster came down with his big sharp teeth and claws and bit into her, tangling his teeth and claws in her branches. Just at this time South Wind arrived blowing very strong and warm against Ice Monster and birch. Birch shook so violently from the South Wind that Ice Monster was thrown free of birch, all the way back to the North, leaving all of his teeth and claws hanging from birches branches. South Wind's friend had overcome North Wind's winter. Even now we see Ice Monster's teeth hanging from trees and many other places. Ho.

JUDITH: Ho. That's great! That's a beautiful story. That's a great way to teach the children too about the forest and the plants and what the value of a plant is. For example, you share the story about the birch tree in particular with it's sweet sap, so that's a good fact actually to impart to them about the value of the birch tree. And in fact, from what my native elders taught me we could make a tea from the inner bark of the birch tree, correct?

CRAIG: Yes, it's really mild and not quite as sweet as maple syrup. It has a very distinct taste. If you ever have a chance to get some birch syrup, which is usually more expensive than any other syrups, try it out. It's a really good addition to your natural element that you take in. There's one more thing I'd like to say about...maybe I'll wait.

JUDITH: No go ahead, go.

CRAIG: I have something else that I wanted to say. Sometimes it doesn't come out the way I would like it to come out.

JUDITH: Well again, we're talking about storytelling. We're talking about winter. So, this is a great example of a lesson, a learning that occurs within a story.

When you work with children do you encourage them to try and figure that out?

CRAIG: I do and usually when I am through with a story, I'll ask the children what do they see in this story that means something to them? What was the message that this story was giving? And they would, from one to the other, say very strange things sometimes. Every once in awhile a child will come up with the right answer or an answer that works. And it's the teaching mechanism then all of the children understand what they're talking about. In this particular story, birch tree is a very important tree in native medicine. The inner bark of the birch and the maple are both medicinal and delicious. And the birch tree has many, many more pieces of medicine that can be used to help their health.

JUDITH: Well when we think of a birch tree, I often think of the canoe. I mean wasn't...I always think of that white bark on a canoe. Is that correct or is that a misperception?

CRAIG: There was a certain part of the country, more toward the Great Lakes that people made the birch bark canoes. We didn't make birch bark canoes (in the NE). We made dugout canoes and most of the Eastern people made dugouts. Birch were really large enough in more of the Northwestern hemisphere over near the Great Lakes than they get here so they were able to make birch bark canoes out of the bark. And it was an interesting process because when they made the canoe, they would have to keep it wet all year or it would dry out and crack. They would keep it in the water and they'd keep using it in the water all the time but at the end of the season when they didn't use it anymore and it was going to get cold, they would fill it with water, sink it in a pond and put rocks in the bottom of it and leave it there all winter. So that when they wanted it in the spring, they took the rocks out, took the water out and the canoe hadn't split. All those things we learn from archeology. We learn them from our ancestors. We learn them from some writings that were done in the 17th century or earlier and it's important to

look at these things and get your bearings on history in the correct way and learn how things were. There's a lot of misconception in a lot of Native American history. People thinking that everybody lives in tepees, everybody rides horses, everybody wore war bonnets. They're all the same but they're not really. All the 500 of the nations... is that we were very different in many ways other than their language and very similar in other ways about taking care of the earth. So, it's a really important thing for us to look at these days.

JUDITH: I agree. I think from my native ancestors and my journey with my native elders, you know the theme that was always there was, we've forgotten the earth. Let's look at the earth. How can we take care of the earth more? Today you and I both know we're getting to a tipping point with some very serious problems. I'm hoping to inspire others with many different ways of looking at the earth and how it teaches us. And of course, storytelling is one of my favorites. I appreciate your story about the birch trees, because we have them here in our landscape. We're here in the Northeast. They're in our landscape. I know that they're a strong medicine plant and they have much to offer us if we stop and pay attention, look around and get to know them better from just taking a walk in the woods getting our two miles and come home. You know what I'm saying?

CRAIG: If you have an opportunity to walk in the woods by all means do it. The Internet is such a resource right now that if you want something you don't even have to buy a book. You just have to go on the Internet or on Goggle and look up birch tree and it will tell you about the birch tree. If you want to know the medicinal value of the birch tree it will tell you that. So, the great amount of knowledge there for us to access. Then you take that which you've gotten off the computer or out of a book and you go out in the woods and you look for these items. And if it's something you can eat or something you can use as a medicine, use it.

JUDITH: And get back to appreciating what's right beneath our feet, and right to our backdoor. Yeah, I like that very much.

Well before we go, is there anything else that you wanted to add? I know we want your contact information for sure.

CRAIG: We have a business, my wife and I, that we make leather goods, hunting knives, jewelry, you name it we do a lot of crafts that way. And our

contacts for our business which is www.mohawkleather.com that will show you what we make in general. It doesn't list everything of course. But by all means contact us that way. And for the powwows, which we do a lot of Native American powwows, we do music festivals – usually Blue Grass music festivals, you can contact www.wanderingbull.com for the powwow schedule. They're a very good resource for craft goods as well. They have wonderful beadwork that they do, and they have good leather, good beads. By all means contact them. They're one of our favorite sources for crafts.

JUDITH: Great. Well I want to say thank you again Craig. I've enjoyed you coming here. I was looking forward to the story and to sharing the story with our listeners.

CRAIG: Thank you very much. I enjoyed it. I'd like to do more so if there's another opportunity at some point.

JUDITH: Well the wheel always turns. We always have a different season and I know you've got a lot of stories in that bag of yours and I would love to invite you to come back and share another one with us.

I want to thank everyone for joining us at *The Holistic Nature of Us*. I hope you feel as inspired as I do by this story and the journey of the storyteller. I certainly do. And again Craig, thank you for joining me today. Music on this podcast is from Craig Standingbear's CD *Reflections*.

This is Judith Dreyer. I'm the author of "At the Garden's Gate", book and blog. My book is available through my website www.judithdreyer.com as well as several distribution arms such as Amazon, Nook, Goodreads and more. I'd like to remind all of you that a transcript is available for each podcast. And please like and share these podcasts. Let's get the word out and support each other.

Remember, NOW is the time for practical action and profound inner change so we value our world again.

Enjoy your day.